

Book Review of *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels: Critically Engaging Past and Present* – edited by Dana E. Lawrence and Amy L. Montz

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An often-heard lament is the supposed lack of creativity that appears to pervade popular culture. With media franchises, adaptations, spin-offs, reboots, and revivals alive and well on streaming services (see Netflix's *The Baby-Sitter's Club*, based on the popular children's/middle grade book series from the 1980s), television (ABC's *The Connors*, is a spin-off of the blue-collar sitcom *Rosanne*, which ran on the network in the 1980s and 1990s), and mainstream film (the ongoing *Fast and Furious* franchise, which has the ninth film in the installment slated for release in 2021), taking a cynical stance regarding the ubiquity of adaptations and retellings is easy. However, just because something has roots in another work does not immediately mean it is clichéd or derivative. For instance, Greta Gerwig's 2019 film adaptation of *Little Women* took a well-known and well-loved story and reinvented it in a fresh and modern way.

The idea that adaptations can offer more than a simple reread or retelling of familiar stories and characters is at the heart of *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels: Critically Engaging Past and Present*. Edited by Dana E. Lawrence and Amy L. Montz (2020) and published by Bloomsbury Academic, this scholarly collection explores how recent young adult novels draw upon previous works, ranging from the expected, such as folklore, mythology, and books from the literary canon, to more unique sources, such as 19th-century New York City. Young adult literature (YAL) offers an especially rich resource for considering adaptations. From Jane Yolen's 1992 *Briar Rose*, which interpolates elements of the fairy tale "Sleeping Beauty" into a story about the Holocaust, to Hannah Capin's 2020 *Foul is Fair*, an update of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, many works of adolescent literature have been based on or inspired by other stories. Additionally, the popularity of blockbuster series such as *Harry Potter*, *The Twilight Saga*, and *The Hunger Games* in the 2000s has led

to the opportunity and demand for spin-offs, sequels, novelizations, and retellings. A glance at the books explored in this work demonstrates how rife YAL is with adaptations. While there is some overlap among the original sources and YAL novels investigated, there is little redundancy in the ideas and concepts, and the YAL novels analyzed represent not just a wide range of titles, authors, and genres but also different types of adaptations.

THE SECTIONS

The book opens with an introduction by Lawrence and Montz, where they establish what constitutes an adaptation in the confines of the book, offer an intriguing example of how adaptation can work in young adult literature using *Sometimes We Tell the Truth*, Kim Zarin's 2016 update of *The Canterbury Tales*, and lay out the different parts of the book. Part One: Representation Matters explores how YAL adaptations can bring voices often muted or unheard in classic literature to the forefront, with each chapter focusing on a different type of representation. For instance, this section includes evaluation of novels that center Rosaline from *Romeo and Juliet*, consider the class and gender implications in *The Great Gatsby*, depict LGBTQIA characters in fairy tales, and question the diversity and inclusion efforts and shortcomings in Rick Riordan's mythology adaptations. The chapters offer a nuanced and thoughtful analysis of representation in both the original source material and the young adult literature that adapts the story and are careful to note how the YAL novels succeed in lifting up marginalized voices and how they fall short. For instance, Saffyre Falkenberg's (2020) chapter, "'Wherever the Flame was Brightest': Identity and Assimilation in Rick Riordan's Green Mythological Adaptations for Young Adults" acknowledges the series' benefits while also noting that "Greek mythological adaptations [still] serve to instill Western beliefs and even a sense of the 'superiority' of Western culture" (p.83) and that the books, despite including some diverse characters, do not necessarily promote inclusivity.

Part Two, entitled "Literature and Popular Culture," investigates how popular culture and the literary canon intersect and how the canon continues to manifest itself today. Chapters include *Jane Eyre* and recent YAL novels that adapt the novel's plot and characters into science fiction and fantasy settings and how Megan Shepherd's Madwoman Trilogy centers the female voice often missing in the Gothic and Victorian novels that serve as the basis for the updates. Additionally, this section examines seemingly incongruous choices, such as the popular of the unlikely combination of Jane Austen and zombies that occurred in the *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* franchise and the

opportunities that arise when childhood touchstones, namely beloved Disney animated films, are repurposed and repackaged for a decidedly adolescent audience in the *Twisted Tales* book series.

Part Three: Making the Past Present is the most loosely defined section, but this ambiguity allows for a great deal of variety and exploration. Of the five chapters in this portion, two address how recent YAL represents and integrates feminism and femininity in their retellings of classics, such as *The Island of Dr. Moreau* and *A Tale of Two Cities*. The remaining three chapters offer intriguing takes on how YAL incorporates the specific historical setting of 19th-century New York City, approaches such as literary tourism in adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*, and the legacy of storytelling represented in Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*.

CRITICAL EVALUATION

The strengths of *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels* are numerous and significant. An aspect that immediately struck me is the respectful examination of adaptation and young adult literature. The chapters deftly adhere to David Buchbinder's (2011) advice that an adaptation should be evaluated on "on the merit of what it sets out to do as a text in its own right" (p. 136). Rather than resorting to comparison, which can lead to inevitable and (in many cases) uninteresting discussions of how a reworking does or does not remain faithful to the original and which version is best (often siding with the original text), the contributors here consider how the young adult authors reconceive, reimagine, and retell the original stories and whether these attempts achieve what they set out to accomplish. Additionally, the authors and editors obviously see young adult literature as worthy of study and regard rather than a lesser type of literature. As co-editor Montz (2020) writes in her chapter, "while many academics and critics discount the importance of young adult literature... we can see that the [young adult] authors are not discounting the intelligence and hunger for information their audiences have" (p. 166, emphasis in the original). The contributors to *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels* similarly do not discount the value and strengths of YAL.

The chapters are also well researched, and the theories and criticism proposed in them are supported by ample, relevant resources. A common and understandable reference used in many of the chapters is Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, a seminal and influential work in adaptation scholarship. Another reference that several chapters use to great advantage is Roberta Seelinger Trites's 2000 work *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature*. Given that many of the YAL adaptations included here focus on re-centering the narrative to promote

the power of voices often excluded in canonical stories, the use of Trites is fitting. While these are two commonly cited works, each chapter includes numerous resources that would be of great value to those interested in the study of young adult literature and adaptations in general.

A third notable strength relates to both the book's respectful treatment of young adult adaptations and the use of research to support the points. Specifically, several chapters skillfully manage to look at YAL books in terms of literary criticism while also considering the texts in relation to the target audience and the educational opportunities presented. Scholarly examinations of young adult literature sometimes tend to focus on the literary merits, or lack thereof, of YAL. While *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels* is undoubtedly a scholarly text with a primary focus on literary criticism, it also acknowledges the benefits that adaptations offer for adolescent readers and possibilities that adaptations can have in classroom settings. For instance, Dalila Forni's chapter on LGBTQIA adaptations of "Cinderella" notes the pedagogical uses of fairy tales throughout history and modern retellings and updates can continue this educational tradition through supporting and promoting diversity in gender and sexual orientation. Other chapters, most notably the ones in Part Two: Literature and Popular Culture, argue that recent adaptations of works from earlier times help adolescent readers better connect to the characters and plots and can serve as a way into stories that initially appear far-removed from modern contexts and sensibilities.

If there is a criticism that I have in regards to *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels*, it is that the book is not long enough, and the fault here likely lies to the financial and physical constraints of publishing rather than with the editors and authors. With many of the chapters, I was left wanting to learn more, and while the numerous references provide some possibilities, it would have been interesting to have the opportunity to read additional analysis and ideas from the contributors. Some of the ideas within the chapters, such as Melanie A. Marotta's sections on cinematic and video game adaptations of *Frankenstein*, could have been chapters on their own, albeit in a different collection. Additionally, some chapters and sections contained so many rich and intriguing ideas that they could have been expanded to several chapters or, in the case of parts one and two, their own books. All this said, the desire for more seems like petty carping and greed, especially given how many merits the book presents.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Adaptation in Young Adult Novels has many potential uses. Given the ubiquity of adaptations in general and their popularity in young adult literature in particular, little scholarly attention has been paid to adaptation in YAL. This book fills a significant gap in the research for young adult literature and adaptation scholars. Young adult literature courses and English literature courses in general could also easily use the text as a whole or in piecemeal, since it provides both valuable insight into YAL, classic literature, and adaptation and serves as an excellent model for how to approach adaptations from a critical standpoint. Finally, sections of the book could be used with some high school classes to introduce students to literary criticism, since the clear writing style and the approachable and familiar nature of the subjects make the text accessible, in the best way possible.

The past 20 years have seen a boom in young adult books being published, and fortunately, academic works have documented and analyzed the richness and variety contained in YAL. *Adaptation in Young Adult Novels* is a welcome and much-needed addition to the scholarship on young adult literature, and I hope it marks the start of additional attention to the prolific and fruitful world of adaptations in YAL.

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